



GLOBAL VIEWS OF LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS

Reflections on the growing worldwide local food movement

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Civil war and the devastation of Syria's food system

Published online 19 March 2013

Citation: Zurayk, R. (2013). Civil war and the devastation of Syria's food system. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 3(2), 7–9. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2013.032.009>

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It is unfortunate that food and war make such good bedfellows. History is replete with instances of food being used as a weapon of siege or as a tool of control. In our globalized world, the domination of food trade has become an integral part of the modern arsenal. Henry Kissinger's alleged quote, "Control oil and you control nations, control food and you control the people," adequately captures this approach to what might be called "breadboat diplomacy," which was deployed effectively in Iraq's oil-for-food program (Arnové, 2003).

Food is also a major mover of people and, while no one knows if Marie Antoinette really did suggest that the people of France replace bread with

cake on the eve of the French Revolution, the message here is quite clear: beware of the hungry masses. As many researchers have suggested (see "Let them eat baklava," 2012), the wave of popular uprisings that continue to shake the Arab world is interwoven with increased world food prices and chronic food insecurity. Food has also been associated with mass displacement and even with genocides. The "scorched earth" strategy essentially implies the removal of the capacity to produce food in order to destroy the fabric of society. One of the earliest such instances comes to us from the Romans, who reputedly plowed salt into the fertile land of Carthage after the end of the Third Punic War in 146 BC. Unable to produce crops, Carthage was abandoned.

Food shortages can also be the result of conflicts and wars. Messer and Cohen argue convincingly that "most modern wars... are 'food wars,' meaning that food is used as a weapon, food systems are destroyed in the course of conflict, and food insecurity persists as a legacy of conflict" (2006, p. 1). In their analysis they refer to the work of Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, who links con-

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flicts with food insecurity through the destruction of human entitlements such as access to food and to the resources necessary to produce food, the environment, welfare, health care, education, and other social infrastructure. It therefore is not by coincidence that 20 out of the 36 countries listed by the FAO as requiring external assistance in food (FAO, 2013) are either in the midst of conflicts or have received large numbers of refugees from war-torn neighboring countries.

These include, but are not limited to, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, and, most recently, Syria.

Syria's case is particularly heartbreaking as the uprising that started two years ago as mass protests against an authoritarian regime has now developed into a full-fledged civil war that threatens to irreversibly destroy its local food systems. As in many other crises, food insecurity in Syria has accompanied a

“perfect storm” that provided the backdrop for a massive disaster. Wheat, which is native to the Levant, provides up to 40 percent of the calories consumed by the Syrian people (FAO, n.d.). Until 2007, the combination of centrally planned economy and state support, in addition to the technical support offered by the International Center for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA), the CGIAR center responsible for the improvement of dryland farming, had made Syria self-sufficient in wheat (see for example FAO, 2010). During the global food crisis of 2008, Syria was one of the countries where local wheat prices were weakly affected by price increases (Khouri, 2012). The combination of economic liberalization accompanied with crony capitalism that was imposed by the Assad regime in the past decade shook the basis of this precarious balance. Five years of recurrent droughts from 2007 through 2012, associated with climatic changes, caused massive migration from the rural areas and fostered

discontent with the security state (Femia & Werrell, 2012).

The rebellions started in the rural town of Daraa, located in the center of the wheat-producing belt of Hawran, and quickly extended to Raqqa and Hassakah. These regions had borne the brunt of rural-urban migration driven by droughts and economic policies. The flames of unrest were fanned by the winds of changes that were shaking the Arab region.

Regardless of the rights and wrongs in the Syrian civil war, as in all other conflicts, it is the rural poor who suffer first. Of a total population of 21 million, the UN estimates the number of refugees having fled the country at more than one million. Most of the refugees are in Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan — three countries where national food security is precarious. The number of internally displaced people is estimated at 2.5 million, although the figure may be

very underestimated due to the difficulty of gathering data. The World Food Program of the United Nations (WFP), which currently feeds 1.7 million people inside Syria and aims at increasing this figure to 2.5 million by April, reports that most of last year's drought-stricken winter crop (mostly cereals) was left unharvested (WFP, n.d.).¹ Increases in the price of inputs and the devaluation of the Syrian currency by 200 percent, together with the precarious security situation, meant that most farmers were unable to sow a crop this year. Last June, the FAO estimated that the losses to the Syrian agricultural sector were in the order of USD2 billion (FAO, 2012).

The war in Syria has dealt a severe blow to the livelihoods of Syrian people and to the farming sector. But it also has implications that go beyond the country's borders. The headquarters of ICARDA in Aleppo were devastated and pillaged.

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¹ For detailed information about food and refugees in the Syrian crisis, check <http://www.wfp.org/crisis/syria>

The center, which contributed to improving the livelihoods of millions of small farmers across the drylands of the world, has closed its doors, and many of its staff have joined the swelling ranks of the refugees. A number of its programs were relocated to neighboring countries such as Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon. While its invaluable gene bank was spared (at least until September 2012, the date the Nature article from which this information was obtained (Yahia, 2012), and its contents have been replicated in the Svalbard gene bank in Norway and in various locations around the world.

The war in Syria is a calamity for the Syrian people, for the poor, for the farmers, and for every person who feels concerned by the fate of a fellow human being. Alas, the situation in Syria is not unique. As I write, there is a protracted human disaster taking place simultaneously in tens of regions all around the globe. The media may not be updating us about them, and the Democratic Republic of Congo may have yielded the front page to Syria, but the fire of wars still burns on the killing fields. In Syria as elsewhere, poor farmers are the first to bear the brunt of violence and displacement. And while there is no lack of hands to feed the wars, the people who feed the world are reduced to mendacity and charity.

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